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A group of superior-ability students at Brooklyn College who had been referred to counseling services for emotional problems were grouped according to academic achievement. Information about typical family background, time of referral, scholarship records is given. A composite picture, based on counseling interviews, is drawn for each of the achievement groups, a picture which includes family relationships, attitudes toward authority, repression, freedom, and conformity.

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BROOKLYN COLLEGE

Office of the Dean of Students

February 18, 1960

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Herbert Stroup, Dean of Students

From: Professor Gladys Watson, Department of Personnel Service

Subject: Emotional Problems of the Gifted Student

Among the many patterns of college life deserving of classification and study, is that of the gifted student whose performance lags behind his aptitude. The problems bearing on such a student's behavior may not in themselves be unique; but his reactions to common problems tend to separate him from other students of different intellectual endowments. The easy judgment, unhappily too common to faculty members, that reference to personal and emotional problems is merely a shield for failure, avoids a grave situation by denying its existence. Reluctance to investigate and, consequently, to discriminate personal problems leads to the summary attitude expressed in "Why coddle the unfit? These students are just not college material; they should never have been admitted." The implications of such comments demand examination.

How does the superior student react to emotional problems? To what extent is his potential achievement modified by emotional problems? What kinds of personal problems are most likely to beset the superior student? In an attempt to answer these questions for one college, the present survey is offered. It is based upon the records of all Brooklyn College students of high academic promise who came for personal counseling during the academic years 1956-57, and 1958-59. The criteria for inclusion are: (1) high scholastic aptitude as evidenced by the attainment of entrance examination scores which placed the student at or above the 65th percentile in academic aptitude or by graduation with honors; (2) referral of the student for personal counseling because of emotional problems; (3) termination of attendance at the College before the fall of 1959.

The group under study totaled 308 students. Of these, 232 had graduated and 76 had either withdrawn, or had been dismissed for poor scholarship. Of the 232 graduates, 100, or slightly more than 43%, ranked at the time of admission in the top one third of their class in academic aptitude. Among this 100, 57 ranked in the top one fifth of their class, 30 in the top tenth, and 5 in the top one hundredth of their class. (See tables 1 and 2 below). Of the 76 who had not graduated, but who were no longer in attendance, 23 or about 30%, were in the top one third of their class at entrance. Sixteen of these 23 had been dismissed for poor scholarship or had withdrawn under an academic deficit. Of the remaining 7, 3 had left college because of a serious psychiatric condition, I had transferred to another college, I had married, and 2 had given no reason for their withdrawal. These 7 are not included in the study.

Three distinct groups emerged from the total, an honors group, a middle group undistinguished by either excellence or failure, and a low performance group.

The honors group contains 25 students classified as high scoring and 10 others whose entrance scores were unavialable or below the criterion, but who had

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graduated with honors. The middle group contains 46 students. The low performance group contains 45 students. Twenty-nine of these graduated in spite of academic difficulties ranging from limited probation to the danger of temporary suspension, to actual dismissal from the College for poor scholarship. Twenty-one students had been dismissed or had withdrawn because of poor scholarship. Of these, 5 had been readmitted with non-matriculated status, had earned their way back to matriculation and eventual graduation.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

For the group as a whole, family background seems to represent a cross section of the College population. In 40% of the families, both parents were born abroad; in 40% both parents were born in the United States; in 16% the father alone and in 4%, the mother alone was foreign born. It may be of interest to note that of the 128 foreign born parents, 106 came from Iron Curtain countries, and 9 others from Germany or Austria. Occupations of the fathers similarly represent a cross section of the College. Nineteen are professional men, 27 own their own businesses, 29 are white collar workers, 38 are skilled workmen, and 13 semi-skilled.

If the family background of each sub-group is studied independently a somewhat different picture emerges. It now appears that 51% of those who graduated with honors had both parents born abroad, that 46% of those who had academic difficulty had both parents born in the United States. In both groups the largest number of fathers were skilled workers, but in the honors group only 6% of the fathers were professional men while in the low performance group, 22% were in that class. On the whole the fathers in the low performance group were of a higher occupational status than those of the honors group. (see tables 3 and 4.)

A rather striking sex difference appears. Of the 35 honors students, 23, or nearly two-thirds, are women; of the low performance group, 32 or more than two-thirds, are men. (see table 5.)

The majority of students come from two-child families, and family position appears to have relatively little effect on scholastic achievement. For both the honors and the low performance groups, life is equally difficult whether one is first or last born. The exception may be in the average group, where the oldest child seems to be in a somewhat favored position. (Table 6.)

TIME OF REFERRAL

It has sometimes been suggested that counseling during the first two years of college life will so prepare a student that he will need little or no help during the final two years. For this group at least that suggestion seems not to be true. Seventy-six or 60% of the referrals were made during the last two years of college. Almost a third of all referrals occurred during the junior year. (Table7.) If we take seriously the notion that one of the functions of the liberal arts college is to enable the student to know himself, it seems reasonable to suppose that the more advanced student might be more aware of questions about his full identity, than the freshman or the sophomore. A large part of college teaching is designed to raise just such questions. Many, probably the majority of students can find answers within themselves or in the process of free discussion with their peers in and out of the classroom. A minority, and this apparently includes some of our most gifted students, have more difficulty and feel the need for some individual counseling in this area. In The Student and Mental Health it is noted that in liberal arts colleges where instruction is individualized and where students are encouraged to question their values, identity crises occur more

frequently than in larger more impersonal colleges.* In the same book, one of the student participants comments, "It appears to me that the 10 or 20 per cent of the students seen in the college mental health clinic are perhaps, the most fortunate students in the college, because college has disturbed them enough to pull the rug out from under their feet."**

In a large number of instances the student had first asked for career counseling, but had soon discovered that his questions were not so much "What shall I do?" "What opportunities are there for people with my qualifications?" "How shall I prepare for a given profession?" as "Who am I?" "What kind of a person am I?" There is certainly a place for vocational counseling of the pragmatic information-giving type, counseling which will help to answer questions of the first kind. But to confuse this with counseling which is concerned with helping a young person discover his identity in the world is to try to answer the wrong question at the wrong time, never helpful to students nor rewarding to counselors. The choice of a career can only be made wisely after the student has answered the primary questions about himself. Career counseling is tangential in such instances; and this fact should be clearly recognized by both student and counselor.

SCHOLARSHIP RECORD

In a group selected for high academic potential, graduation with honors would be expected. Actually of the 100 graduates of known high capability, only 25 earned honors. When we remember that 30 in the group were in the top 10% of their class, the number is disappointingly small. Twenty-four graduated cum laude, 9 magna cum laude, and 2 summa cum laude. Departmental honors were earned by 17; 5 in Humanities, 4 in Social Science, 4 in Natural Science and 5 in Education. (Details appear in tables 8 and 9.) Among graduation awards were 2 National Science Foundation Fellowships, 1 Woodrow Wilson award, 1 Fulbright Research Grant, and 1 Regents College Teaching Fellowship. On the other hand, among the 100 graduates with known high entrance scores, 24 had scholarship difficulties ranging from "danger of dismissal" to "plus probation." An additional 5 were actually dismissed for poor scholarship, but had worked their way back into college and graduation.

PRESENTING PROBLEMS
THE HONORS GROUP

The composite picture of the honors group*** shows a tense, driven individual with a compulsive need to achieve which excludes almost everything else. He has few or no friends, seems unable to relate to anyone, and feels valued only in porportion to his ability to bring home high grades. Fear tends to be his dominant emotion; fear of failure, fear of water, fear of meeting his peers. There is frequently a notation of schizoid tendencies. The important parent is likely to

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*D.H. Funkenstein (ed.), "The Student and Mental Health," Proceedings of the First International Conference on Student Mental Health, (New York: The Riverside Press), 1956, pp. 263 ff.

**G. H. Wilkie, A Student's View of Mental Health in "The Student and Mental Health," D. Funkenstein, (ed.) p. 27

***All comments apply only to this group of students with emotional problems, not to all honors graduates.

be the father, who is seen as stern, demanding, often distant, sometimes uninterested except for the constant pressure for high achievement. Parents in general are seen as over-protective and infantilizing. For both men and women the area of sex is a fearful and largely unexplored one. For a number, the problem of identity has never been recognized. The comment of the counselor, "You are a man, you now have to make your own life, your own choices" may come as a revelation.

In general, the honors group tends to be fearful, obedient, to have introjected the demands of the parents, to have repressed many of their natural cravings. This is in marked contrast to the low achievement group which tends to be resistant and rebellious. Since two thirds of the first group are women and of the second, men, it is possible that there is here a sex difference resulting from differing cultural expectations for men and women. The expression of aggression is considered more acceptable in a boy than in a girl. Female rebellion is generally more quickly and more decisively repressed. Girls tend to be more docile than boys, possibly more able to accept the demands of parents as reasonable and justified, more willing to work very hard for parental approval. Moreover, the demands on the girl are not so great as those on the boy. Of course she must not disgrace the family by failure, but equally of course she will eventually marry and be supported by her husband. The boy has no such refuge. From the beginning it is clear that he must support a family. Often there is also the expectation that he will do better than his father. When this is coupled with the unspoken admonition not to undermine his father's authority by surpassing him, there is no way out of the dilemma. At home the boy must be passive and obedient; outside the home he must be aggressive and dominating. The girl does not face so many conflicting demands. It is possible, even praiseworthy, for her to be submissive and passive both at home and abroad; there is no requirement that she equal or surpass her father. The girl, allowed less freedom than the boy, may be more influenced by parental values; the boy, spending more time outside the home, may be more responsive to peer values. The girl tries to fulfill the feminine role by obedience and study; the boy tries to fulfill the masculine role by rebellion and refusal to conform.

In this study honors students come largely from homes in which both parents were born abroad, in which the father is a skilled workman. Low performance students come largely from homes in which both parents were born in the United States and in which the father is a business or professional man. Possibly where both parents are foreign born there is a greater strength and cohesiveness in cultural background than there is among the first generation Americans. Father may be distant, stern, dominating; mother meek and submissive, but everyone accepts that pattern as the right and normal one, although as the child moves through high school and college, he may come to question the eternal fitness of this arrangement. In those families where both parents were born in the United States, father, especially if he is a successful business or professional man, may be trying to perpetuate the old pattern in opposition to mother. The fact that neither may be conscious of the problem may lead to the destructive in-fighting which is disastrous to the children.

The cultural conflict includes more than the struggle for the emancipation of women and a more democratic way of living. There is the whole question of religion, for this predominantly Jewish group a very serious one. As has often been pointed out, the child who rejects his parent may reject all that his parent stands for. This may mean rejection of the parent's religion. As one young man said, "I'm not Jewish! I refuse to be Jewish! Oh, yes, I know my parents are Jewish, but I'm talking about the Jewish religion. I simply AM NOT JEWISH! (But if not Jewish, what am I?") Or there may be the demand of the child to choose his own friends, his own marriage partner, even though friends and mate are of a religion different from the parents'.

The cultural gap between the lives of the parents and the lives that the children as college graduates will lead is sometimes so wide that it is not surprising that the young people quail before it. One young man said, "But it's presumptuous for me to think of being a college teacher! My father can't read or write, can hardly speak English. And I should be a college teacher? That might be for my son, not for me." Another, who had graduated summa cum laude, with departmental honors, decided to be a post office clerk. It looked safer and easier than trying to become a professional man. Many others will settle for lives of quiet mediocrity. This does not mean that they will not become bitter frustrated men who may vent their frustrations on their families. It may mean that their sons, like so many of the young men in this sample, will regard their fathers as poor weaklings, people to be despised and pitied.

Margaret Mead has observed that "College presents a hazard...the alienation of one's children from one's own way of life."* Too often the parents do not realize this until it is too late. The fear of this alienation is often back of the unspoken demand not to surpass the parent. It may find expression in a mother's command to her daughter not to "go out with a Ph.D. because he would be too good for you." Whether it is expressed or not, the unspoken fear is often with the parent as with the child. The danger is perhaps greater for this very gifted group, or perhaps they are more aware of it. The nearer they are to graduation, the more frightening is the prospect of leaving the well-known and safe world of the parents and venturing into the unknown and frightening world which may be theirs.

THE AVERAGE GROUP

This is a group with a wide variety of problems of relationships with parents, problems of growing up, of discovering one's own identity, of relationships with authority figures. Fear, anxiety, depression, hostility are all reported. Men in the group tend to feel inadequate, to fear they will not be able to fulfill the masculine role in society. Three of them have had acute psychotic episodes. Both men and women report difficulty in relating to people, inability to make decisions, jealousy of siblings. There is some evidence of retarded heterosexual development. One man in this group, and one woman in the honors group, were distressed at their resort to alcohol as an escape. Those with parents born in the United States generally report that their mothers are over-demanding, over-protective. Depression, anxiety, hostility are characteristic, together with feelings of worthlessness, of lack of a sense of personal identity. Those with one or both parents foreign born generally report that they have distant and domineering fathers, and that they have considerable difficulty with authority relationships.

Standing between the honors and the low achievement group in academic achievement, they occupy this relative position in other respects. So far as birthplace of parents and occupation of father are concerned, they are nearer to the low achievement group. They also tend to show more hostility and aggression and less fear. Here again they resemble the low achievers. Perhaps this is not surprising in view of the fact that for young people of this degree of ability, their record, while not one of failure, does not correspond to their potential.

Students in this group are more concerned with problems of personal identity and less with failure to relate to others than are those in either of the other groups. Many of them are student leaders, some of them very successful ones

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*M. Mead, "Cultural Change and the Student" in The Student and Mental Health, D. Funkenstein, ed., p. 147

who have won gold or silver citizenship keys. Possibly they are trying to atone for academic failure by developing interpersonal relationships; possibly they have refused to compete with siblings in the academic area, and have chosen another field of interest. Whatever the reason for choice, they tend to be dissatisfied with their achievements, and to be searching for a better way of living than they have found.

Here, as in the honors group, women predominate, 27 to 19.

THE LOW ACHIEVEMENT GROUP

These students often come from home situations that are described as brutalizing, over-powering, extremely destructive. Parents may openly reject the child or may more subtly reject him by over-protecting or making too great demands on him. In some instances there is no father in the home, only a malicious, hostile mother, often one who because of her own failures hates all men. It is not clear why more boys than girls should come from homes like this. Possibly it is a result of admissions policy, though it seems more likely that girls from this kind of vicious background never get to college. They have not the strength to survive in an academic world. Possibly too, the girls in families like this are more often forced to leave school and go to work, since after all, the education of a woman is not important. Perhaps more of them escape into marriage. Whatever the reason, fewer of them come to Brooklyn College.

A few students in this group have reacted by retreat and withdrawal. They find safety in hiding. They find it difficult to speak in class. They avoid competition by refusing to try. It is more bearable to such a student to fail in an examination because he did not study, than to study and get a poor grade; more bearable to have no friends, than to try to find a friend and risk a rebuff. The men tend to be effeminate, passive, dependent. In a sense, these students are committed to failure; they await it with the passivity of the defeated.

The other, and larger, part of this group has reacted with rebellion and resistance. They are committed to the opposition. Their rebellion is as over-determined as the failure of the first group. They are compelled to resist, to see all authority, even their own, if they are student teachers, as dangerous, inimical, destructive. They find it difficult, if not impossible, to suppose that an adult might be friendly, might have any reason other than hostility or innate perversity for the requests or demands that he makes. Ironically, it is from this group that some of our best known student leaders come. It is satisfying to be aggressive and defiant in class, but infinitely more so to act out one's rebellion on a larger stage. With guidance and help such students may become winners of gold or silver keys for campus citizenship; without such guidance, they may become disruptive forces. Instances of both kinds are to be found in this sample.

No matter which course they choose, the young people in this group are unsure of themselves, and are seeking to discover their identity. They are trying out possible roles for the world of adults. If the young man who is trying failure as a way of life is accepted by others as a failure, he may adopt that role permanently. If the young woman who adopts resistance and opposition as a role is accepted by others and labelled a rebel, she may carry that role through life. The one who refuses to grow up, who clings to childhood as the only safe refuge may spend his life seeking protection and security.

Here are to be found the anxious and depressed young people who unconsciously seek their own destruction, sometimes to punish punishing parents, some-

times to agree despairingly with what they feel to be the adult judgment of their worthlessness. It is here that the largest number of frank psychoses are found. In a group of 45, 3 have been hospitalized, and 4 others are said to be possibly or probably pre-psychotic. Others who are clearly too neurotic to be treated on campus need to be helped to seek off-campus therapy. Still others, not yet fixed in their roles, have enough ego strength and resiliency so that even short term counseling can help them to adopt new and more satisfying ways of living. Those who fear failure so desperately can be helped to succeed, modestly at first, but so that they can have a sweet taste of success instead of the bitter one of failure. Those who must rebel can be helped to forget the straw men, and to use their rebellion for constructive purposes. Both can be helped to realize that they are no longer helpless children in a world of angry giants, but men and women in a world of other men and women who have difficulties much like their own; and that even parents and teachers are only people.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

An analysis has been made of the records of 126 students who, having been referred for personal counseling, had entrance examination scores or achievement records that placed them in the top one third of their class, and who have terminated their work at the College. Of the 232 who had graduated, 110 or nearly 48% were in the high ability group as defined by this study. An additional 16 students who had been dismissed or had withdrawn from college because of serious academic difficulty were in the high ability group. In the group of 126, 27% graduated with honors, 37% graduated without distinction, and 36% had serious academic difficulties, in some cases so serious that they were dismissed before graduation.

Two thirds of the honors group were women; two thirds of the low achievement group were men. Descent from foreign born parents of the working class seemed to be associated with the achievement of honors; even as descent from United States born parents of the professional or business class seemed to be associated with low achievement. The honors students tended to be compulsive, driven people, with few or no satisfactory interpersonal relationships. The low achievers tended to be rebellious and resistant, unable to achieve well in any area. The average group tended to be more concerned about personal identity than about interpersonal relationships, to be less driven and repressed than the honors group, somewhat less rebellious than the low achievers. For the men, there is some evidence that the presence of a dominating father is accompanied by rebellion against authority, and with expressions of hostility and aggression; and that the presence of a driving dominating mother is attended by feelings of personal worthlessness and hopelessness.

There is no evidence that students in the group were using the presence of emotional problems as an excuse for not doing well in college work, nor is there evidence that they were not "college material." There is considerable evidence that distress interferes with, if it does not prevent, effective study; and that moreover, distress is detrimental to happy interpersonal relationships, and to achieving an effective maturity.

In the words of Malleson,

> The university has to take the growing senior boy and act upon him in such a way that he matures into a well-balanced man...To do this, the university must employ a variety of means far wider than those of the lecture room...Personal problems, inherent in the process of growing up, inhibit

the student from making full use of the unviversity. Hence, counseling him about his personal difficulties and helping him over his periods of distress is as germane to the whole process of education as lectures, seminars, preparing essays, etc.*

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*N. Malleson, "Ecological Concept in British Student Health Services" in The Student and Mental Health, D. Funkenstein, ed., p. 443.

Table I. Comparison of selected group with total group, entrance examination scores

	Whole Group	Test scores 65%ile or higher	Percent of total with high score
Graduated	232	100	43
Not in attendance	76	23	30
Total	308	123	40

Table 2. Entrance test scores of 100 graduates

Percentile rating	Number in group
65-79	43
80-89	27
90-98	25
99-100	5

Table 5. Sex distribution in honors, average, and low performance groups.

Sex	Honors	Average	Low Performance	Total
Male	12	19	32	63
Female	23	27	13	63
Total	35	46	45	126

Table 3. Comparison among honors, average, and low performance students. Birthplace of parents

Parents born	Honors	Percent	Average	Percent	Low Performance	Percent	Total
Both in U.S.	9	26	17	37	21	46	47
Father U.S. Mother non-U.S.	2	6	3	7	3	7	8
Mother U.S. Father non-U.S.	6	17	9	19	7	16	22
Neither U.S.	18	51	17	37	14	31	49
Total	35	100	46	100	45	100	126

Table 4. Comparison among honors, average, and low performance students. Paternal occupation

Father's occupation	Honors	Percent	Average	Percent	Low Performance	Percent	Total
Professional	2	6	7	15	10	22	19
Business, managerial	4	11	14	30	9	20	27
White collar	9	26	12	26	8	18	29
Skilled worker	14	40	9	19	15	33	38
Semi-skilled	6	17	4	9	3	7	13

Table 6. Comparison among honors, average, and low performance students, Family position.

Position	Honors	Percent	Average	Percent	Low Performance	Percent	Total
Oldest	12	34	19	41	14	31	45
Middle	1	3	3	7	6	13	10
Youngest	13	37	11	24	14	31	38
Only	9	26	13	27	11	23	33

Table 7. Class status at time of referral: honors, average and low performance groups.

Class	Honors	Average	Low Performance	Total
Freshman	3	9	13	25
Sophomore	7	11	10	28
Junior	15	15	15	45
Senior	10	11	7	28
Total	35	46	45	126

Table 8. Graduation Honors

Honor	Number
Cum laude	24
Magna cum laude	9
Summa cum laude	2
Total	35

Table 9. Departmental honors

Department	Number
Music	1
Political science	1
Sociology-Anthropology	1
Speech	1
Chemistry	2
Mathematics	2
Psychology	2
Modern Languages	3
Education	4
Total	17